*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

# MARYLAND PROJECT HAS BLEAK OUTLOOK

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By Eugene L. Meyer

It's known as Riviera, a $2 billion developer's dream for the banks of the Potomac River in Charles County south of Washington, and it's in trouble.

The plan, conceived by James H. Burch, who initiated the billion-dollar project now known as PortAmerica upriver in Prince George's County, calls for 6,720 dwelling units, 800 motel rooms, up to 30,000 jobs, 500 boat slips, 6.5 million square feet of office space, shops and restaurants -- a veritable mini-city all on 2,246 heavily wooded acres on the Indian Head peninsula.

In Burch's vision, there would be a unique people-mover system and a fleet of hovercraft to carry commuters the 22 miles to and from Washington.

The vision did not play well locally.

Residents formed two opposition groups: Citizens Against Riviera and Save Wildlife/Oppose Riviera Development.

They said the massive project would bring too much traffic, too many people and too few benefits to them and the county.

After three public hearings, pages of petitions, lengthy legal briefs, stacks of letters, engineering, environmental and emotional arguments pro and con, Charles County planners turned thumbs down on Riviera.

In a 37-page report issued this month, the planning staff said that Riviera was "not compatible with the housing mix and the population intensity of the neighborhood."

It said the project "as proposed would have a detrimental effect on the environmental quality of groundwater and surface water, endangered species, wildlife and natural habitat areas."

Burch found the report "so blatantly full of errors, it's surprising it would even see the light of day . . . . My gut reaction was it's completely not logical. In general, they were environmental ayatollahs, with severe and harsh fanatical interpretations of how the environment ought to be preserved, taking into account everything except the human species . . . . "

But on Aug. 15, the county planning commission unanimously agreed with the staff and voted to recommend Riviera's denial to the county commissioners, who will hold more hearings and take their own vote.

Opposition groups are elated by the turn of events.

"Almost every aspect we pointed out as major problems was confirmed, and more," said Glenda Taylor of Citizens Against Riviera.

"I think that's the end of Riviera as it's proposed."

But Burch, who said he has now obtained long-term financial commitments for Riviera, vowed to fight on and hinted at a lawsuit.

Seeking public support, he also took out full-page advertisements in Charles County's two weekly papers.

The planning staff report, he said, "at least lets us know what they see as the deficiencies and assets. It lets us even come up with solutions to things we didn't see as problems before.

"Every single problem {the county commissioners} address will be solved, every single one," he said.

And if the commissioners still say no, Burch added, "I have partners and plenty of money. We buy the land and we wait, my partners and I."